

The Town Behind the Gown: Making a Case for the Forgotten Partner

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Communities often go unnoticed by their academic tenants. The campus world of research and education can be self-absorbing, and the focus of its applications dilated to the state, national and international scale. When community impact is considered at all, universities view their role as beneficial to the economic and social health of their town. University-related growth and development of the host community is seen as a fortuitous byproduct, incidental to the presence of the institution. An attitude of detachment on the part of the university contributes to the classic town/gown conflict, a spatial dual existence in which the community lies beyond closed gates. As one commentator notes, "...universities have been, to put it mildly, poor neighbors." (Harkavy, 10)

Can universities and communities coexist? Scholars investigating university-community relations have called for the development of partnerships. By working together, it is argued that mutually beneficial results can be obtained. A normal partnership implies, however, that two parties enter into a limited joint venture as the result of a bargain. By assuming that the university and the community are separate entities, a relationship of power is established. Too often the town finds itself in the shadow of the institution, trying to get help, advice, or at least some attention.

What needs to be recognized is the *implied* partnership that already exists between the university and its host community. According to corporate law, an *implied partnership* is not formally delineated in a contract or

agreement. Rather, it is established from a history of joint activities and the conduct of the parties (Black, 1979). Superficially, universities and communities operate as separate entities. But when carefully examined, there are many evidences of actions which reveal a fundamental co-dependency, and a certain degree of implied acceptance on the part of both parties of a shared future.

Universities cannot turn their backs on communities, and claim a merely Platonic relationship. Once an implied partnership is recognized by a court, "the parties are estopped from denying the existence of a partnership." (Black, 1979) It is not simply that communities are lucky to have a campus and should maximize the crumbs from the university table; universities have an affirmative obligation to function within their spatial context and consciously contribute to the evolution of the community. By ignoring its implied responsibilities, the university harms its partner and jeopardizes the joint enterprise.

Evidence of Partnership

University commitments to the community are, to some extent, documented. The foundation of evidence of an implied partnership is the written agenda of university participation and contribution to society. These ideals reveal a base level of intent to function within the community context.

Institutional mission statements often include community goals and objectives. The mission statement of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill requires the university to "extend knowledge-based services and other resources of the University to the citizens of North Carolina and their institutions to enhance the quality of life for all people in the state..." While the wording reflects the University's state-oriented charter, it calls for service extension and actual enhancement of life.

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The application of this goal to the immediate community is repeated in a policy finding and recommendation:

"The impact of a research university upon its environment is conditioned by the excellence of its faculty and programs and facilitated by the willingness and effectiveness of the institution in communicating with the community of which it is a part. The two are closely intertwined. As the quality of the faculty improves, the university's reputation is enhanced and so, too, its social responsibility." (Research Mission, I6, 1985)

Of course, an academic institution brings many benefits to a community, including educational, cultural, environmental and recreational opportunities. Access to the resources of an academic institution can enhance the livability of a community and deliver state or even national status. At the same time, universities require a healthy and stable setting for their activities.

The presence of a university creates major impacts on the local economy. According to a recent economic impact study, UNC-Chapel Hill operates on a combined payroll of close to 350 million, and is directly responsible for 9500 university jobs (Goldstein and Luger, 1,11). These huge inflows of cash and employment create demand that is largely supplied by the community. As evidence of a partnership, economic ties demonstrate an inherent co-dependency; universities and communities look to each other for employment needs, services and quality of life.

Because of this impact, and the facilities that they manage, universities claim that they already play a significant enough role in their communities (Giebner, 22). But is this an actual extension into the community, or is it merely a byproduct of what the university does for itself? In other words, is the university consciously making efforts to improve the community, or simply allowing access to its normal operations? Critics claim that universities operate independently of the local community, or at best view the community as a secondary priority (Giebner, 22). If part of the goal of university programs is community enhancement, then the local residents should be considered and consulted about the form and effects of these activities.

The evidence of partnership also extends to the social climate of the community. While universities are part of a community in the physical, spatial sense of placement in a territory, "community" also refers to social cohesiveness, the network of "recognition and reciprocity" that form the basis for collective actions (Davis, 1991).

When universities choose to isolate themselves, the inherent collective relationship is threatened, and the typical town/gown frustrations ensue. By confining themselves to campus, universities damage the cohesion of the community as a whole.

Accountability

The funding of universities comes from many sources. Tuition, research grants, fund-raising, alumni contributions, federal and state government allocations are pieced together in different combinations to support university systems. One consistent, but often over-looked, contributor to higher education is the local community.

Universities depend on their immediate surroundings. Much of the quality of life that characterizes a college town or neighborhood depends upon adequate utilities and well-maintained roads. Good public schools make it easier to attract faculty and staff. Local police provide security and parks and local historic preservation contributes to a comfortable academic atmosphere.



Well-run programs, like Carleton College's ACT, allow students to serve their communities.

All of these are community investments upon which the university regularly depends.

Because of the value that society places on universities, they are to a large extent exempt from compensating the community. As nonprofit institutions, universities do not contribute property tax for local services. As a result, the surrounding community subsidizes the university; local tax-payers provide more than their share of the expenses of their community. A recent example of the tensions that can occur is the question of clean-up costs in Chapel Hill following the 1993 NCAA basketball championship. Although, in the past, the University of North Carolina has not contributed to the clean-up and damage costs, Town Manager Cal Horton is pressing for "...the University to share the burden with the city." (Daily Tar Heel, 1)

Another benefit that Universities receive is the use of public transportation systems. Because of the high rate

of University-affiliated riders, most large Universities operate their own mass transit systems. While UNC does provide a portion of the costs of Chapel Hill transit, some town council members feel the contribution should be more. (Feldman, 1993)

Some commentators conceptualize the university/community as an exchange relationship (Balanger, 63). While true acting partners share resources and assets, the exchange theory illustrates the exploitation that can arise if there is an imbalance in the use and provision of goods and services. Between partners, an inequality in contribution threatens accountability and encourages mis-use of resources. Essentially, what has occurred is that universities have appropriated community funds for their own purposes.

What do community residents receive in return for their investment? Beyond the incidental (and unintended) benefits of the university presence, many of the externalities of universities are negative. Traffic is increased, as well as the noise pollution that accompanies a student population (Giebner, 21). The operation of the University impacts air quality, and places demands on land-fill sites. Crime may increase, along with property damage and an increased need for street-cleaning. Many of these problems could be controlled or alleviated through discussion and joint planning.

Much of the traditional town/gown conflict arises when communities are left out of university planning decisions. Examples include physical expansion, affects on parking and traffic, and security (Giebner, 21). Recently, when the Grateful Dead played at UNC's Dean Smith Center for two consecutive nights, Chapel Hill was visited by thousands of concert-goers and traveling merchandisers, the town police were overwhelmed and had to call in extra help from nearby Durham to cover security (Chapel Hill Herald, April 6). The decision to schedule the band was made without community input or consultation.

The community needs contact and an opportunity to voice concerns and touch base with regard to services and any potential development projects. Frustration results from being locked into a relationship with a destructive and antagonistic partner. The resolution does not rely solely on a forum or public hearing strategy. In addition to dialogue, the university should project an image of active civic concern, one which may offset its externalities. By simply being involved, universities can define for themselves a positive role, while helping to resolve other challenges of the locale. It is this concept that provided the impetus for the creation of organizations such as NUEA (National University Extension Association), which seeks to promote social impact through community development.

The university does not have to consider working with the community to be a burden. Perhaps more than an

obligation, community development presents a valuable opportunity for Universities to participate in society within their most direct spheres of influence.

For many universities, community development is a necessity. Sharp down-turns in community vitality can negatively affect recruitment and growth, in some urban locations "...universities are being seriously threatened by the collapse of their neighboring communities." (Harkavy, 10)

Wrongful Exclusion

Universities must avoid independent decision-making when considering community outreach and development. This may be difficult because of the problem of identifying the community climate. A frustration for university officials who try to coordinate with the local community is that community groups often have loosely defined or conflicting objectives (Giebner, 24). Much time and energy can be spent trying to unravel local politics and negotiating with all parties. Negotiating within a socio-demographic environment also requires communication and dialogue skills beyond traditional architectural models that are common to university master plans (Freeman, D'Elia, and Woodard).

One alternative is to create a mediating structure, which would coordinate the use of University resources towards community development. Although the lack of university organizational models for public service policy (Harkavy, 15) makes creating such a structure difficult, there are some familiar possibilities. Either a special Board of Directors or an actual Community Development Corporation would allow interaction without requiring either party to shoulder all the administrative responsibility. Through joint participation, these objectives can be worked into a broad community-wide plan. A Board of Directors of mediating structures should consist of academic representatives as well as community organizations and residents (Harkavy, 20).

There are many ideas and examples of community programs which could be sponsored by universities, including Youth Corps, clean-up drives, after-school programs, landscaping, and housing rehabilitation. In North Carolina, the REAL (Rural Entrepreneurs with Action Learning) program creates public-school based small business incubators, run by high school students, with the support of the University-based Small Business Development Center (Harkavy, 22).

All of this activity is dependant upon the recognition of a partnership. By allocating its resources and attention, the university can take a leading role in overcoming misunderstandings and inaccuracies. The use of surveys can provide objective data on which to base discussion and negotiation (Balanger, 67). Universities only identify their role in assisting community groups (Rohfeld, 182) as they begin to see their interest in developing



"Adopt-a-grandparent", an ACT program at Carleton College.

residential areas, public schools and businesses (Harkavy, 16).

Duty of Care

Having made an investment in the university, the community should expect that their perspective and needs be studied. Unfortunately, universities cannot even be accused of preaching what they do not practice. Without more attention to the field of community development, NUEA officials fear the worst:

"...until this challenge is met, human values will continue to decline, and the varied manifestation of human maladjustment which characterize our times will continue to multiply (Rohfeld, 181)."

Universities can begin by emphasizing community development in the academic environment. In addition to courses, specific student service programs are one way for universities to extend themselves. By encouraging "prosocial behavior", universities can contribute to a student's personal development while providing a valuable service to the community.

Educational analysts have noted a recent decline in civic responsibility, specifically among students:

"From this standpoint, universities occupy strategic ground. Almost half the population, including nearly all our public officials, business executives, civic leaders, and professionals, enter our colleges and professional schools. For several formative years the university is the dominant influence in their lives. (Bok, 61)

After classroom preparation, community service can prepare students for civic responsibilities. At the individual level, students already provide a substantial resource of volunteer workers. Students often create and

develop their own programs. In Chapel Hill, one example is "Communiversity", where 50 volunteers spend Saturdays teaching African-American children history, heritage, culture and community values (Cashion, 1993). Student efforts to serve their communities demonstrate a willingness and a desire to participate in local problems, and to interact with real people and issues.

But students should not always bear the burden of initiating and maintaining service programs. The transient nature of student populations is a barrier to long-term commitment and effectiveness. As temporary residents, students cannot be expected to establish meaningful community relationships without assistance.

Activity in the community should be part of the learning process, an extension of the academic interaction between student and teacher. Programs need to be adequately supervised and explained, so that students participate in their administration and identify the moral implications of their activities (Bok 101). Successful training efforts need to teach the supporting values of community responsibility (Serow and Dreyden, 554, 560).

This civic training may be particularly important for public non-religious universities, where students are less likely to have community service experiences (Serow and Dreyden, 560). Graduate students can be involved in this process as well, and be provided with an opportunity to apply theory and classroom learning to actual situations.

Professors are often inactive in the community. This is understandable, to some extent, considering teaching responsibilities and professional commitments. Decisions to grant faculty tenure are often based on quantity and quality of research as well as instructorship; what is little known, and seldom recognized, is that another tenure component is community service. According to UNC-CH Trustee Policies and Regulations, tenure decisions should be based on several components:

"...demonstrated professional competence, including consideration of commitment to effective teaching, research, or *public services* (Trustee Policies, Sec.2, 1987)."

Ironically, at present the tenure demands of producing and publishing research often prohibit professors from taking the time to participate in community service (Kennedy, 1990-91). By recognizing "public service" as a legitimate component of a tenure decision, faculty can

afford to invest some of their energies locally. The resulting effects of implementing this commitment could encourage practical direction for scholarship; valuing community service at the faculty level allows research and education to be related to real social needs.

Community service can also help develop unity among the participants themselves. By adopting an "academically-based, public service approach", teaching and research can integrate academic departments (Harkavy, 12). A strategy of community service is interdisciplinary, and can work towards healing scholarly divisions and "intellectual fragmentation" (Harkavy, 12).

After meeting their primary obligation to students, universities also need to be educators of the community. Community residents are increasingly looking for educational leadership to provide assistance in solving local problems (Rohfeld, 182). Much could be accomplished through programs especially targeted at minorities, public officials, and older students by including faculty and campus professionals as teachers and leaders (Miller, 1990).

Some University-based programs do reach out to the community at an organizational level. One such program is the Center for Community Planning at the University of Massachusetts. By providing field project opportunities as part of a degree program, the Center helps students pick up planning and analytical skills while serving the community (Colon, Kennedy, and Stone, 1990-91). The benefits of the program extend to the community as a whole, and contribute toward a process of democratization:

"We see community development very much as a development of a sense of community, as a development of community ties, as a development of people within their communities taking control over the planning and governmental processes that affect their lives (Kennedy, 62)."

Conclusion

In a court of law, universities might be liable to their communities for damages. The true costs, however, are ill-defined and to some extent irreversible. A progressive resolution might be to appeal to universities to accept more responsibility for their local environment. Increased community consciousness is identified as a "third wave" of university planning:

"... the new approach requires that colleges and universities abandon some of their independence and separateness and interact with their community and their city in a more progressive and caring manner. Higher education needs to understand that their own futures are bound up with the physical, economic, and social futures of their cities or towns. (Freeman, D'Elia, and Woodard, 1992: 31)

The separation of town and gown is largely artificial;

both identities participate in a larger concept of community. Both interact and progress as neighbors, depending to a large degree on each other. Once this existing partnership is recognized, universities may down the path of becoming *good neighbors*.CP

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